

Bottles, Scott. *Los Angeles and the Automobile. The Making of the Modern City*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987. Pp. xii, 302. Illustrations, tables, maps, index

Richard Harris

Volume 18, numéro 2, october 1989

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017759ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017759ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Harris, R. (1989). Compte rendu de [Bottles, Scott. *Los Angeles and the Automobile. The Making of the Modern City*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987. Pp. xii, 302. Illustrations, tables, maps, index]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 18(2), 180–180. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017759ar>

Cincinnati, are deliberately excluded, contributes in a small way to the study of immigrant labour history from a Marxist perspective. Of the twenty-four selections in "Suggestions for Further Reading," two are by Jentz and five by Keil. *German Workers*, published by a prestigious scholarly press, serves as still another example of committed radical history with a political point of view moving into the mainstream of American historiography.

Larry Larson
Department of History
The University of Missouri, at Kansas City

Bottles, Scott. *Los Angeles and the Automobile. The Making of the Modern City*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987. Pp. xii, 302. Illustrations, tables, maps, index.

North Americans have a love-hate relationship with the automobile. Planners hate it. Almost everyone else loves it; at least they buy and use cars whenever they can. Scott Bottles, a historian now working in the real estate division of Wells Fargo Bank, challenges a variety of automobile critics by documenting the popularity of the automobile from at least the time of the Model T.

Appropriately enough he focuses upon Los Angeles, tracing the pattern of use (and local politics) of transportation from the turn of the century through to World War II. He examines successive debates over the regulation of the local streetcar companies, traffic and parking in the downtown area, and transportation planning. Throwing in evidence pertaining to automobile use and the results of local referenda on transportation issues, he builds a convincing case that Angelenos consciously opted for the automobile en masse in the 1920s, when per capita ridership on the Los Angeles [street] Railway Company dropped precipitously while per capita automobile ownership increased almost threefold. He argues that this shift

was not encouraged by municipal government or planners. Rather, "the individual citizen began using his car because the reform movement could not assert its control over the traction companies." The companies would not - indeed Bottles suggests that their finances often would not allow them to - improve their service. No powerful popular movement attempted to ensure that good mass transit would be provided, if necessary through public ownership. Downtown business interests wanted better transit, but the car appealed to a broader geographical constituency. Most people chose cars because they offered greater freedom and ease of movement, even in the early 1920s when the streets could not accommodate them. Subsequently, the municipal government improved streets and eventually built freeways. In so doing, Bottles argues, it followed rather than led public opinion.

The challenge of this argument is twofold. First, it is a direct rebuttal of the widespread "conspiracy theory" that the automobile manufacturers bought up transit companies in the 1940s with the intention of closing them down to create greater demand for their product. By the 1940s, Bottles argues, the battle was over. Especially in Los Angeles, but in American cities as a whole, the transit companies were on their last legs and the city was already being remade around the car. The people had voted with their pocketbooks. Secondly, and more important, Bottles challenges the whole notion - eloquently expressed by Lewis Mumford and repeated many times since - that in so doing the people were being shortsighted. He points out that in building better roads Los Angeles has compounded rather than solved the problem of congestion - a favourite argument of the proponents of public transit. But, on balance, he reckons that the automobile has been better than the alternatives, allowing greater freedom of movement while providing lower residential densities and a higher quality of life. The people, he implies, are not fools.

The argument is, up to a point, persuasive. Certainly, his challenge to the conspiracy theory carries weight. Moreover, his praise for the automobile is a useful corrective to recent criticisms. In taking the automobile for granted, we should not forget that it has been, and to some extent still is, a liberating machine. But liberating only for those who own one. Modern suburban environments, of which Los Angeles is an exemplar, have been built around the car. On foot or by transit they can be very difficult and unfriendly places to negotiate. People who cannot afford a car and those who are unable to drive - including many disabled or elderly people, as well as most persons on low incomes - are left on the hard shoulder. Bottles tells us very little about the experience, views, and politics of these people, leaving nagging doubts that the majority has gained at the expense of a (perhaps sizeable) minority. To the extent that such doubts are well founded, Bottles's claim that the automobile is "democratic" rings hollow.

Richard Harris
Department of Geography
McMaster University

Lai, David Chuenyan. *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988. Pp. xvi, 382. 41 tables, 55 figures, and 40 black and white photographs. \$29.95 (cloth).

David Lai's book on Canadian Chinatowns describes their physical and cultural landscape from 1858 to 1988. The book also deals with Chinese immigration to, and migration within, Canada and gives some examples of Chinese experience of racial discrimination. *Chinatowns* is an urban ecology study of meticulous detail, supplemented by tables, excellent maps, and photographs. Even though Lai's clear style makes it easy reading, the detailed discussion of various Chinatowns may be overwhelming to some readers. However,